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"We're not Anti-U.S.": An Interview with Telesur Director Aram Aharonian

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INTERVIEW WITH TELESUR DIRECTOR ARAM AHORONIAN:

“WE ARE NOT ANTI-US.”

Nikolas Kozloff

Nikolas Kozloff (NK): To what extent has Telesur been able to compete with private media in South America?

Aram Aharonian (AA): We are a satellite station. We are primarily geared towards retransmission on cable stations. But in many countries we don't have access to cable because this is owned by the same owners of the private stations. That's one of the problems we're confronting now, because these cable owners don't provide us with any access.

NK: How frequently does that happen?

AA: It's not frequent, but it has affected us in the large countries. For example, in Mexico there are media monopolies, Televisa and

Television Azteca. In Argentina, almost everything is dominated by the Clarin group. In Brazil cable is very scarce, there are 3.5 million subscribers and 80 million people so it's quite marginal. So, the first logical step for us is to find big cable companies. But there are also small cable providers operating in the interior of countries. Another option is to conclude agreements with regional and national TV stations, which may be private or state-owned, and provide a Telesur segment for them to broadcast. At this point, I can't tell you how many people watch Telesur, it's not that I don't want to but it's difficult to measure. At the very least, we are talking about 7 million people, and potentially an audience of up to 70 million cable subscribers.

NK: What is Telesur's long term plan?

AA: We want to make our programming available to the widest number of people. We're looking to form all kinds of alliances, so that we can broadcast the newscast and exchange images. In Italy there's a channel called Arco Iris, which is part of the Sky cable system. Arco Iris broadcasts 18 hours of Telesur and 6 hours of local programming. So, there's lots of different ways to reach people. In our year and a half on the air, we have influenced CNN en Espanol's programming. Before, CNN would tend to concentrate on natural disasters in its Latin American reporting. Now, you can see blacks and Indians on CNN. CNN has responded rapidly and professionally to Telesur. Here, some say CNN is awful. No, CNN is first class and provides an excellent product in accordance with the interests of the company. But I tell you that in this sole year and a half, Telesur has achieved a lot of credibility. Meanwhile a lot of Latin American stations have requested images from us. Why? Because we're producing a lot of images that weren't available before. But, we have had problems in certain Latin American countries. In Colombia, we ran into trouble. There were a lot of people that got irritated because we covered all the scandals and investigations about drug smuggling and paramilitaries there. The Colombian government took measures against our correspondent. We won't change our priorities as a result of such incidents, however it is a fact that people have become irritated because we're providing information that's not available on local TV. We actually provide context so that people know what the news is about. In general since the Gulf War, journalism has become instantaneous: we lost any semblance of investigative reporting. There's no analysis, no debate. So, we're rescuing journalistic ethics, in the sense that we give various opinions about goings-on, and provide context for the information. And this has irritated the Colombian government, for example.

NK: Some South American countries have strong political and economic ties to the U.S., such as Chile. Is the future of Telesur a little murky as a result of this division in South America?

AA: No, you're starting from a false assumption, which is that Telesur is against the U.S. Yes, we criticize the U.S., but we also criticize many Latin American countries. When Oscar Arias, the former president of Costa Rica, speaks well of the North

American Free Trade Agreement, we cover that. If Michele Bachelet, the president of Chile, says it's important to encourage economic ties to Japan and the U.S., we cover that too. Our problems haven't had much to do with this so-called division that you mention but with other Latin American countries. One of the first stories that we covered had to do with the United Nations peace keeping force in Haiti. These U.N. forces, for the first time, were almost entirely comprised of South American countries. The Haitians, in our report, said that the Latin American soldiers were repressing the Haitian people. Some foreign governments felt uncomfortable with our reporting, including Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay. I believe these are real problems however, and you don't resolve them by ignoring them or covering them up. Look at Bolivia. For six months

Bolivian TV said whatever it pleased about Evo Morales, they called him a dirty Indian, anything you can imagine. But despite this campaign on Bolivian TV, Evo Morales was elected president with more than

50% of the vote, something which hadn't occurred for 40 years. So something is amiss here. We used to believe that everything on TV was the truth. Not anymore. People started to learn how to read and interpret TV. That is to say, people watch it but they don't believe in its message. A similar phenomenon to Bolivia occurred in Venezuela as people started to grow more skeptical of the media.

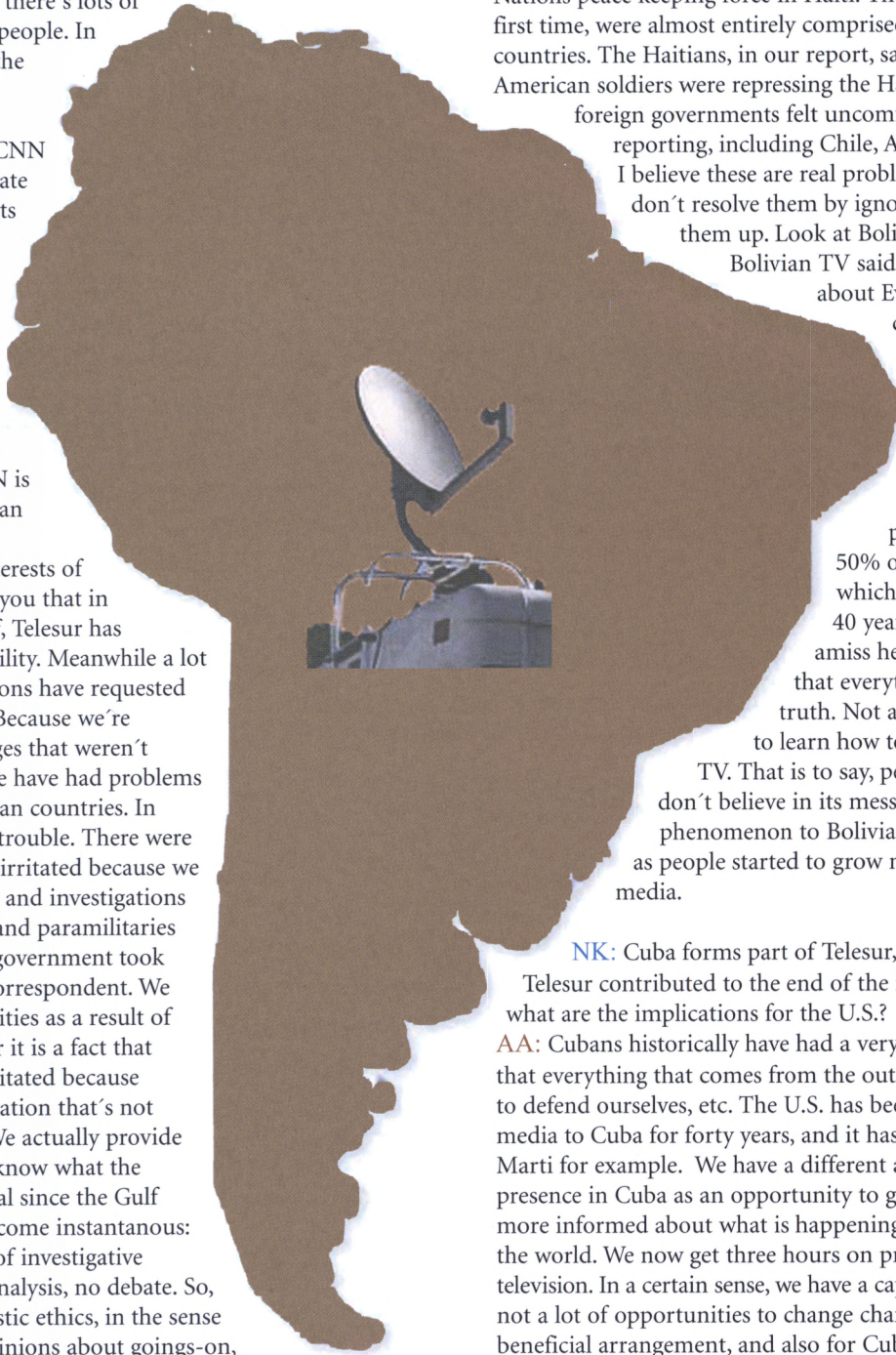
NK: Cuba forms part of Telesur, to what extent has

Telesur contributed to the end of the island's isolation, and what are the implications for the U.S.?

AA: Cubans historically have had a very siege-like mentality, i.e. that everything that comes from the outside is bad, it's necessary to defend ourselves, etc. The U.S. has been trying to transmit its media to Cuba for forty years, and it has done it poorly, Radio Marti for example. We have a different approach. We see our presence in Cuba as an opportunity to get the Cuban people more informed about what is happening in Latin America and in the world. We now get three hours on prime time on Cuban television. In a certain sense, we have a captive audience as there's not a lot of opportunities to change channels. For us, it's a beneficial arrangement, and also for Cuba.

NK: Ecuador has just elected a new president who has good relations with Chavez. What are Telesur's plans in Ecuador and does it look more promising now?

AA: In Ecuador there's a big problem, which is that there is no state channel. Other Latin American countries have state channels. Right now, we are urging the creation of a state channel there, and if that channel becomes a reality Telesur might incorporate itself and in fact we are very excited by this possibility. In Ecuador we have excellent broadcast exposure in



the interior. Not so much in Quito but on regional, private, and university channels in many provinces.

NK: How well has Telesur been able to compete with CNN in terms of viewership and financially?

AA: CNN has twice or three times our viewership. But, CNN's influence and distribution has deteriorated a lot over the last five years, primarily for economic reasons.

NK: Right now, there's a whole process of South American integration taking place. To what extent does Telesur contribute to this integration?

AA: We begin with the assumption that first we must get to know ourselves, then we must recognize each other, so as to move forward and integrate ourselves. Our problems are similar, the expectations are similar; Telesur is merely a tool so that people get to know what's happening in Latin America, so that people recognize, Oh, that's Ecuadorian, or Oh, that's Chile. And this may spur the process of integration as you say. The problem in Latin America is that we don't know anything about each other, we are blind to ourselves. We always saw ourselves through the lens of Madrid, London, New York.

NK: I see your photo on the wall showing you and Chavez together. Does he ever call you?

AA: Never. That photo was taken in 2001 when Chavez came to a meeting of the foreign correspondents association. I haven't spoken to Chavez since November, 2005 when he came to observe Telesur's installations.

NK: And the government hasn't expressed discontent with your coverage?

AA: It doesn't get involved. Some officials in various countries have raised voices of concern however.

NK: Which officials?

AA: Well on the Haiti issue that I mentioned earlier, they call you up. Our coverage of a dispute between Uruguay and Argentina having to do with paper companies has also been controversial.

NK: Economically, how does the outlook seem for Telesur?

AA: In the medium term, we have to look for ways to self finance ourselves. We've been lucky that this year the Venezuelan state has agreed to provide a new headquarters for us, near to our present installations in Caracas. The overall lack of information in Latin America has obliged us to find new correspondents and we're opening branches in Quito, Lima, and Montevideo. We also want to seek out ways to broadcast our signal to Europe, and to get into the Brazilian market. We also want to create a photo agency so that we can commercially exploit our images. We also need to find a way to sell video material.

NK: How profitable is Telesur's Web page?

AA: It's not profitable in an economic sense, but in terms of the amount of people who have clicked on there. We get about 1.7 million hits per day, these people may access our streaming coverage over the internet.

NIKOLAS KOZLOFF is the author of *Hugo Chavez: Oil, Politics, and the Challenge to the U.S.* (Palgrave, 2006). Kozloff is currently writing another book, *South America's New Direction* (Palgrave, 2008), about the political realignment in South America. Contact him: nikoo_las7@hotmail.com